

The University of Chicago

THE SCOPE OF SHELLEY'S PHILO-
SOPHICAL THINKING

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF
THE HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

1935

By

ALEXANDER PATTERSON CAPPON

Private Edition, Distributed by
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO LIBRARIES
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

1938

The University of Chicago

THE SCOPE OF SHELLEY'S PHILO-
SOPHICAL THINKING

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF
THE HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

1935

By

ALEXANDER PATTERSON CAPPON

Private Edition, Distributed by
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO LIBRARIES
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

1938



CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

That the absolutistic strain was dominant in Shelley's philosophy cannot for a moment be doubted. Nevertheless, it is important to keep clearly in mind the relativistic side of his thought if one wishes to see his reflection as a whole and without distortion. Fortunately we are able to do this. In Shelley's reflection on the subject of ethics the eclectic, and somewhat confused side of his thought is revealed. Even here, however, with all the apparent inconsistencies that could be picked out, Shelley may be commended because he does not deny the claims of any point of view that seems to have a sound relationship to experience or to thought. This feature gives the interpretation of Shelley's philosophy, full of material as it is, a certain complexity which is not due to subtlety alone. It makes of him, moreover, a figure decidedly representative of the multifarious tendencies of his time.

Shelley's thought is marked by a distinct recognition of historical and political evolution, but in no special philosophic sense. In the manner of the eighteenth century, he worships "progress", but he clearly realizes that progress is a slow process of growth, even while he longs ardently to reach the goal of his ideal, or something far more nearly approaching it than his day presented. A full appreciation of the time necessary for social evolution comes to Shelley in his maturity. In A Philosophical View of Reform there are constant suggestions of what he aspires

to as an ideal, but they are tempered by recommendations which are moderate and adapted to circumstances of his time. Thus he favors a gradual extension of the franchise rather than its complete realization. This may be related to the empirical emphasis, which, in various connections, we have already noticed in Shelley.

The early nineteenth century view of growth as an evidence of the spiritual character of history does not appear in Shelley, though at first one might expect to find it. The romantic faith in "growth" ultimately led to a fuller appreciation of the importance of the study of man and his institutions in terms of their genetic development. We find that the poet, during his young manhood, awakens to the importance of the study of history, and determines to pursue it, even though he anticipates a degree of unpleasantness in the task. As a consequence of his historical studies, Shelley's later works frequently reveal a remarkable appreciation of the importance of historic movement. He recognizes the similarity in aim in the Revolution of 1688 and the French Revolution, and he sees the degree of progress accomplished by them. He does not deny that they were marked by imperfections. Reversing a well known quotation, Shelley declares that the French Revolution is too often "praised for its good" while its evil is "interred with its bones."¹

Shelley is well aware of the importance of economic factors in the interpretation of history. This is clearly revealed in A Philosophical View of Reform.² In A Defence of Poetry, moreover, he analyzes social history with considerable discrimination, indicating the interplay of literary, artistic, and philosophic movements with general cultural developments, and pointing out the

¹A Philosophical View of Reform (London, 1920), p. 19.
²Pp. 40-42.

importance of the chivalric system to social evolution. The whole spirit of Shelley's historical studies reflects the developing tendency to interpret history dispassionately. It recognizes the organic character of man's historical development; it reveals the importance of a close scrutiny of history in its social, political, artistic, and economic phases. So far as the relation of this to Shelley's general speculation is concerned, we may say that it is harmonious with the developing empirical emphasis important in his day, and increasingly important in the modern world up to the present.

We have seen that Shelley's thought may be related to a broad mass of philosophical reflection. Central in his views, however, is the doctrine of spirit and an absolutistic interpretation of the universe. His interests in the advancing empirical movements of his day are strong, and many-sided, but his final interpretation of empiricism and its relation to the problem of truth is a subtle one bringing him back to essentially absolutistic concepts. Radical scepticism, it is true, lays a strong hold upon him from time to time, and he fluctuates between strong hope and disillusioned despair. Shelley's radical scepticism, however, is not related to a mechanistic view of the world; it is based upon complex aspects of his more mature theorizing. The way is always in the direction of an idealistic or realistic absolutism. Neither pragmatism nor a Deweyan instrumentalistic experience philosophy had arisen to offer another solution.

We may note that Shelley did not go in quest of a philosophy self-consciously and systematically. What actually happened was that, after his early preoccupations with materialism, his interests led him to reflect rather closely upon subjectivistic doctrine. What did Shelley gain from this temporary adherence

to immaterialism? He came to feel most keenly the importance of the subject so far as a theory of knowledge was concerned; and in metaphysics he tended to emphasize spirit as opposed to external things. He came also to believe, in a new and deeper way, that the world is characterized by unity.

Shelley's transition from subjectivistic doctrine toward an objective realism such as one finds in Spinoza and Plato, on the one hand, or an objective idealism having affiliations with Hegel, on the other, was probably not a direct movement. He put behind him, because it seemed to lead to scepticism, the view that the esse of things is percipi which he had regarded for a time as of fundamental importance. His movement in the direction of objective idealism, however, should not be regarded as an essential contradiction of his drift toward a realism such as Plato's or Spinoza's. To Shelley the distinction would probably not be at all clear-cut, and indeed some philosophers of our own day regard the two attitudes as reconcilable.

In the new view toward which Shelley is moving, then, we find a great stress is placed upon unity and upon spirit. Something of an interactionism between matter and spirit is suggested at times, but Shelley like Plato is inclined to minimize the claims of matter, though he recognizes in considerable measure the advances of empiricism.

The dominant intellectual problem in Shelley's life was probably his effort to escape materialism and its consequences. The presence of this problem we have steadily noted. Elsewhere¹ we have observed that Shelley placed Lucretius in a lower plane

¹"The Scope of Shelley's Philosophical Thinking," unpublished Doctoral dissertation, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Chicago, 1935, p. 160.

than Plato as a poet - using the word of course in the broad sense - because of the limitations of Lucretius' thinking and his concentration upon the material world. Shelley in his maturity has gone a long distance from his youthful theories, and indeed from the point of view he maintained when he wrote the Revolt of Islam. In the preface to that work he had referred to Lucretius "whose doctrines are yet the basis of our metaphysical knowledge...."¹

What Shelley was fundamentally seeking in his maturity was a religion - a substitute for the religions of authority, with which he had long before become dissatisfied, as well as for the religion of deism. The change which had taken place in Shelley is exemplified in the marginal notes he made in his edition of Bacon. On this point Clark remarks as follows:

Two lines beyond this passage [a passage in Bacon] Shelley marks with underscoring the following: "But farther, it is an assured truth, and a conclusion of experience, that a little or superficial knowledge of philosophy may incline the mind of man to atheism, but a farther proceeding therein doth bring the mind back again to Religion." p. 5. (7 & 8). I have put into italics those portions which the poet has underscored. This thought became a fixed notion with Shelley. He quoted it in the Notes to his first important poem and often thereafter embodied this sentiment in letter or essay.²

Natural religion does not suit his needs; it is a product of the peculiar "rational" spirit of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Shelley feels the need of a belief in spirit in the universe, but it must be an immanent spirit.

The poet, however, never reached a complete resolution of his philosophical problems. He leaves materialism behind, and progresses through subjectivism to immaterialism but is halted soon after by radical scepticism. Scepticism had a way of reasserting itself in his thought, and this fact is connected intimately

¹The Complete Poetical Works of....Shelley, edited by T. H. Hutchinson, (New York, 1933), p. 37.

²PMIA, XLVIII, No. 2, June 1933, p. 535.

with his melancholy over the slow progress of social reform. Often, in his philosophical thinking, Shelley stands wavering between scepticism and an incomplete idealism, the construction of which he anticipates, and the general outline of which at times gives him a sense of hope and even exultation such as that which breathes through the last act of Prometheus Unbound. In this poem the spirit of the new position he has attained gets into the very rhythm and intensity of the lines, as in the stanza,

Our feet now, every palm,
Are sandalled with calm,
And the dew of our wings is a rain of balm;
And, beyond our eyes,
The human love lies,
Which makes all it gazes on Paradise.¹

But while Shelley is at times full of hope - and this hope is based in part upon his fragmentary but highly varied philosophical reflection - it is scarcely ever completely untinged by melancholy. Material for philosophic scepticism was to be found in most of the writers he read - particularly in the subjectivistic hypotheses of Berkeley and Hume, but also incidentally in Locke and Plato. This situation accounts for Shelley's brooding sense of the mutability of things which is embodied in many poems, two of which, indeed, carry the very title "Mutability". While a touch of romantic sentimentalism is usually present in Shelley's poems of this type, on the whole they are marked by a depth and sincerity, an internal oneness, which is never seen in works of simulated feeling. They come as part and parcel of his life and his thought.

A word may be said about the relation of Shelley's thought to his poetry. The duality present in his work - the sense of the nothingness of existence which may be set beside his ardent

¹Complete Poetical Works of....Shelley, edited by Hutchinson, ll. 123-128, p. 253.

enthusiasms - gives it as a whole a very singular note. Certain poems, for example Adonais, reveal both qualities we have been discussing. In Adonais a single stanza at times contains fluctuations between the two views with a result which is of course injurious to the unity and therefore the beauty of the whole. The presence of this antithetical material in Shelley's poems we have explained through examining the path taken by his thought.

In conclusion, we may note a dominant characteristic of the poet's general philosophic attitude: like Faust in the fourth scene of Goethe's play, Shelley is impatient with the restrictions of life and longs to leap beyond them. He would almost curse life: above all, the tame dull spirit that bears its evils patiently. This quality is revealed in his lyric poetry. Shelley gives expression to feelings induced in him by experience in his inward and outward life - a life of philosophic reading and a life of action. He ardently seeks to embrace earth as well as heaven, and brings to his work some anticipation of the best of modern thinking with which he tries to combine some of the subtlest idealistic reflection of the past.

